

# What is Horror Fiction?

## By the Horror Writers' Association

That's a difficult question. In recent years the very term has become misleading. If you tell people you write horror fiction, the image that immediately pops into their minds is one of Freddy Krueger or maybe Michael Myers, while you were hoping for Shelley's *Frankenstein* or Stevenson's *Dr. Jekyll and Mr. Hyde*. The popularity of the modern horror film, with its endless scenes of blood and gore, has eclipsed the reality of horror fiction. When you add to that a comprehension of how horror evolved as both a marketing category and a publishing niche during the late eighties - - horror's boom time -- it's easy to understand why answering the question of what today's horror fiction actually is has become so difficult.

But let's give it a try, shall we?

Webster's Collegiate Dictionary gives the primary definition of horror as "a painful and intense fear, dread, or dismay." It stands to reason then that "horror fiction" is fiction that elicits those emotions in the reader.

If we accept this definition, then horror can deal with the mundane or the supernatural, with the fantastic or the normal. It doesn't have to be full of ghosts, ghouls, and things to go bump in the night. Its only true requirement is that it elicit an emotional reaction that includes some aspect of fear or dread. Alice Sebold's *The Lovely Bones* is therefore just as much a horror novel as Stephen King's *Salem's Lot*. Tim LaHay's *Left Behind* series is just as full of horror as Dan Simmons' *A Winter Haunting*. ...

In his 1982 anthology *Prime Evil*, author Douglas Winter stated, "Horror is not a genre, like the mystery or science fiction or the western. It is not a kind of fiction, meant to be confined to the ghetto of a special shelf in libraries or bookstores. Horror is an

emotion." He was correct and his words have become a rallying cry for the modern horror writer.

What makes horror literature so pervasive is that its need to evoke the necessary atmosphere and sense of emotional dread is utterly dependent on who we are as readers -- as people. As children, we might be afraid of the shadows looming from a half-closed closet door or of the monster we believe lies under the bed. Terrors of the imagination run wild at that age. As adults, our fears become more sophisticated, more grounded in worldly events. They become the death of a loved one, the terminal illness of a small child, the fear of our lives running out of our control. Horror, by nature, is a personal touch -- an intrusion into our comfort levels. It speaks of the human condition and forcibly reminds us of how little we actually know and understand.

Robert McCammon, one of the founders of HWA, said, "Horror fiction upsets apple carts, burns old buildings, and stampedes the horses; it questions and yearns for answers, and it takes nothing for granted. It's not safe, and it probably rots your teeth, too. Horror fiction can be a guide through a nightmare world, entered freely and by the reader's own will. And since horror can be many, many things and go in many, many directions, that guided nightmare ride can shock, educate, illuminate, threaten, shriek, and whisper before it lets the readers loose." (*Twilight Zone Magazine*, Oct 1986)

Years later, Winter would echo these statements in the afterword to his award-winning anthology *Revelations*. "Horror is that which cannot be made safe -- evolving, ever-changing -- because it is about our relentless need to confront the unknown, the unknowable, and the emotion we experience when in its thrall."

Walk into any high school in the country and you will discover that horror fiction has a rightful place in our educational system. Whether it is the short stories of Edgar Allan Poe or the classics like *Dracula* or *The Picture of Dorian Gray*, many of the defining

works of literature can be labeled as horror. So why, you might ask, is horror so generally frowned upon by the literary establishment?

The answer to that question lies in the nature of the publishing industry. Back in the seventies, an unknown writer burst onto the scene with a novel called *Carrie*. The work went on to be made into a wildly successful film, and a new genre was born. The author I'm referring to is, of course, Stephen King. King set the stage for what horror was to become in the eighties and early nineties.

Almost overnight, King's brand of fiction became a multi-million dollar industry. Publishers saw the dollar signs looming before them and charged full speed ahead, making horror into a product. They gave it a specific identity, a specific formula. Writers then popped out of the woodwork, eager to embrace and attempt to duplicate the stunning success of Mr. King.

It was at this point that horror literature lost its identity.

Instead of "evolving, ever-changing," horror became defined -- typecast if you will -- forced to conform to a certain method and a certain manner. Publishers flooded the market with books that matched this formula, giving readers more and more of what they demanded. Hollywood got into the act, making movie after movie with the same basic themes, the same old scares, so much so that today we have horror films that parody these very elements. Before we knew it, horror novels and horror movies had become synonymous. Even worse, it was difficult to tell one horror novel from another, so important had the formula become. A market glut swiftly followed.

Horror's originality, its vital essence, had been stolen right before our eyes.

As the horror boom of the eighties turned into the drought of the

nineties, horror went underground. In order to save itself, it became a chameleon, masquerading as other genres, hiding itself in other styles. And therein lay its salvation.

Horror has once again become primarily about emotion. It is once again writing that delves deep inside and forces us to confront who we are, to examine what we are afraid of, and to wonder what lies ahead down the road of life.

It's a funny fact of today's market that those writers whose works define the quintessential essence of horror are not considered horror writers. Millions of people read Stephen King, but the average King reader doesn't read other horror writers. Dean Koontz's books are filled with the strange and fantastic, yet he vehemently argues against being labeled a horror writer, despite being the first president of this very organization. John Saul thinks of himself as a writer of thrillers; Clive Barker a master of the fantastic. HWA founder Robert McCammon stopped publishing altogether to avoid being trapped in a box not of his own choosing when the publishing world demanded more horror instead of the historical novel he had so desperately wanted to produce.

Chain bookstores have for the most part now done away with horror sections, allowing writers to stand on the strength of their prose instead of how their work is labeled. Major New York publishers are releasing books about witches and gargoyles and ghosts with the word horror notably absent from their spines. Recent entries onto the *New York Times* bestseller lists have included two separate novels about nanotechnology run amuck, the story of a brutally murdered young girl watching her family's life unfold in the aftermath of her demise, the latest in a long series about the end of the world and the coming of the antichrist, and, of course, the latest paperback collection from Stephen King. Not surprisingly, none of these books bear the horror label, yet every one of them fit our definition of a horror novel.

Just as our fears and terrors change with time, so too will the definition of horror, not just from age to age but from person to person.

Precisely as it should.